August 22, 2010
Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

I wonder if anyone has done a full count of the English expressions drawn from the nautical world. We use them quite commonly, of course, but direct attention is seldom given to their original sense. Thus, when we tell our children to "pipe down," we do it without the pipe. Nor do the children become alarmed that we might "let the cat out of the bag." Mercifully, we hope, they don't know what Lord Nelson and his friends meant by the "cat."

Still, we expect children to catch something of our meaning when we tell them to learn the ropes, to clear the deck, not to go overboard, to fend off, to bail out, to bear up, to avoid the doldrums, to maintain an even keel, not to run afoul, to haul up short, to make a clean sweep from stem to stern, to shake a leg, to weather a storm, and to sound off. If they fail in these respects, they can expect us to take the wind out of their sails, and maybe even take them down a peg or two. Otherwise, there is a distinct danger they will be stranded or beached, because we are not about to raise a bunch of loose cannons.

Several decades have elapsed since first I found delight in the Hornblower stories. The major challenge of those novels and short stories, if memory serves, was their profusion of enigmatic nautical terms, which required patient recourse to a dictionary. For example, the difference between a sloop and a brig was, at that time, quite beyond my comprehension without extra help.

About a decade ago, this was followed up by reading through the complete series of Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey-Maturin stories, but by this time I had the benefit of Dean King's *A Sea of Words*, an excellent source for the definitions of nautical expressions. The reader grows accustomed to the strange nouns and verbs associated with that kind of literature, much as he gradually picks up bits of "braid Scots" from reading the Waverly novels.

To those called landlubbers, however, nautical conversation has always sounded like gibberish, and therefore a thing readily mocked. An early example comes from Jonathan Swift. In the course of mocking just about everything going on in the early 18th century, Swift threw in a bit of fun with nautical language, when he described Gulliver's approach to Brobdingnag:

"The ship lay very broad off, so we thought it better spooning before the sea than trying or hulling. We reefed the foresail and set it, and hauled aft the foresheet; the helm was hard a-weather. The ship wore bravely. We belayed the fore-downhaul; but the sail was split, and we hauled down the yard and got the sail into the ship and unbound all the things clear of it. . . We hauled off upon the lanyard of the whipstaff, and helped the man at the helm. We would not get down our topmast, but let all stand, because she scudded before the

sea very well, and we knew that, the topmast being aloft, the ship was the wholesomer, and made better way through the sea, seeing we had sea-room. . . . Then we set the mizzen, maintopsail, and the foretopsail. Our course was east-northeast, the wind was at southwest. We got the starboard tacks aboard; we cast off our weather braces and lifts; we set in the lee-braces, and hauled forward by the weather-bowlines, and hauled them right, and belayed them, and hauled over the mizzen tack to windward, and kept her full and by as near as she would lie."

Not one in ten of Swift's readers, even at that time, had the foggiest idea what he was talking about, but the endless, incomprehensible stream made great satire.

Even funnier is Twain's account of Tom and his 'pirates'---A.K.A., Huck the Red-Handed, the Terror of the Seas, and the Black Avenger of the Spanish Main---slipping their raft into the current of the Mississippi: "They shoved off, presently, Tom in command, Huck at the after oar and Joe at the forward. Tom stood amidships, gloomy-browed, and with folded arms, and gave his orders in a low stern whisper:

'Luff and bring her to the wind.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

'Steady, steady-y-y-y!'

'Steady it is, sir!'

'Let her go off a point!'

'A point it is, sir!' . . .

'What sail's she carrying?'

'Courses, tops'ls and flying jib, sir.'

'Send the r'yals up! Lay out aloft, there, half a dozen of ye ---foretopmaststuns'l! Lively, now!'"

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